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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the communication and learning problems of nontraditional students. Its methodology drew on case studies and interviews with 10 nontraditional students at two midwestern universities. Findings fit into various categories: curriculum, assignments, social isolation, classroom structure, theoretical framework, and interpersonal communication. First, college curriculums are designed for the traditional student and often do not given ample consideration to the needs of nontraditional students. Second, nontraditional students do not feel that assignments in their courses are designed with their needs in mind. Third, nontraditional students often feel socially isolated because of their age and because they commute. Fourth, sometimes the classroom structure dependent on sophisticated equipment and hardware presents problems for the reentry level students. Fifth, some nontraditional students would prefer to have more control of the direction of their studies. Sixth, some nontraditional students find faculty difficult to interact with, particularly those who have preconceived ideas about educational philosophy. This study suggests therefore that modifications in the educational system are in order. Curriculums could take into consideration the individual needs of students. Faculty advisers, support groups, and mentoring systems specifically designed for the nontraditional student could prove helpful. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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INTERPRETING THE NARRATIVES OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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INTERPRETING THE NARRATIVES OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

The trend of an increasing non-traditional students' population is obvious on most college campuses. Unlike the 1960s when U.S. higher education's young collegians stimulated many institutional changes during the 1970s, institutions' concerned for the non-traditional students, and the trend continues. Currently one-third of the post-secondary population is comprised of non-traditional students.

Numerous reasons bring non-traditional students to university campuses. Business and industry employers have high number of workers who need to learn new skills to keep up with the rapid advances in technology. In addition, changes in U.S. demographics, societal patterns, and individual life styles necessitate new learning and retraining in many areas of life. Accordingly, increasing numbers of older students are returning to colleges and universities. The change in college population is illustrated by Mary A. Grolladay (AppendixA).

Educators and administrators recognize this trend and have investigated and examined the difficulties non-traditional students might encounter when reentering the higher education.

The non-traditional students are older; they return to classrooms with rich experiences associated with a variety of significant life stories, anecdotes, and events (Kidd, 1973; Lenz & Scalvitz, 1977; Berryman-Fink, 1982). The characteristics of these students are often similar to the adult learners who assume responsibilities for learning and prefer to rely upon their own prior experiences (Knowles, 1980). However, non-traditional students are more focused and have a self-defined goal prior to reentering college life.

They work extra hard to achieve their educational goals, and they expect the institutions to provide learning resources, support systems, and a conducive environment to assist them in achieving their goals (Berryman-Fink, 1982).

> According to Cross 1982)"the great majority of degree seeking adults who come from working class backgrounds; most are first generation college students, upwardly mobile... considerably more representative of the general population than are traditional college students.(p.67).

One of the basic characteristics of non-traditional students is their age; they are 25 years of age and older and are enrolled in the classes which are organized for traditional students who are 18 to 24 years old (Katz, 1983; Smith, 1979). In addition to age

the non-traditional students bring a repertoire of prior experiences to the classroom. The age, the prior experiences, self-guided goal, and difference in styles of learning present many problems for the non- traditional students. With regard to learning Knowles (1978) presents two perspectives, it can be viewed as " a process by which behavior is changed, shaped or controlled," or it can be explained " in terms of growth, development of competencies, and fulfillment of learning" (p.7). Both of these perspectives on learning have important implications for the non-traditional learners as they tend to be highly motivated and perceive learning as, " synthesizing classroom activities with real life situation," Shankar (1990). They like to plan their own learning activities. Their desire to learn is organized around practicality of ideas. They like to seek a pragmatic approach which allows them to implement the theory and concept in real life situations.

The non-traditional students assess their capabilities to succeed in terms of their prior experiences, family structure, regionality, and culture (Shankar, 1992). They use their cognitive structures to redefine the meaning of their college experiences in relation to themselves. Here the underlying factor could be the notion that the selves are not " simply constituted from the reflected appraisals of others." (Schellenberg, 1990 p.7). In fact the integrity of the self reflects an inner organization of

experiences by the organism which are based on the external environment. Such a pattern of organization is akin to Mead's idea that one of the most important factors in human communication is the individual's capacity to " take the role of the other" (Mead, 1934).

The non-traditional students also differ in the area of socialization. Their needs and objectives to socialize are different accordingly they tend to choose different type of activities, events, and friends.

This study examines the communication and learning problems of non-traditional students. Issues and concerns raised can be of benefit to the teachers, administrators and the students.

Methodology

The methods for this study I were individual case study and conducting and in-depth interview with the participants. The participants were approached through a networking method. Thus the the research techniques used in this study were qualitative which allowed the researcher to investigate and examine the topic in its natural setting with due consideration to participants'choice.

Because of the preliminary nature of the study no random selection procedure of the participants was used. Participants were ten non-traditional students at two midwestern universities. The plan was that if the responses from the ten initial respondents would indicate that continuation of study would be useful, the

study would be expanded. (Reminder, here include demographics).

The case study approach involved personal and telephone interviews. The questionnaire used in this study was comprised of demographic and open-ended questions. The subjects were asked a series of openended pertaining to their communication and learning needs. Additionally they were asked the kind of difficulties they face as a reentry level student. The content of the interviews were transcribed and interpreted. Each participant was informed about the purpose and nature of the study. They were told well.in advance that their participation is completely voluntary and they can refuse to participate any time they want. Each interview lasted from 30 to 40 minutes and was conducted either by phone or in a place which was selected by the participants.

In order to transcribe the content of the interviews the Del Hymes' formula was used; this formula describes the techniques for narrative interpretation and studying contextual speaking. The in-depth analysis of narratives and stories provides a detailed description of the problems experienced by the students without any suggestive elements by the researcher. The interviews accompanied with open-ended questions enabled the respondents to express themselves freely without being influenced by any suggestive questions.

Findings

The findings of the study fit into four categories,

curriculum, assignments, social isolation, classroom structure, theoretical framework, and interpersonal communication.

Curriculum

Majority of the students suggested that the current curriculum should be modified. The curriculum needs to fit the learning need of all students including the ones who do not fit the category of traditional students, these comments obviously refereed to the non-traditional students. Interestingly the suggestions regarding modifying of curriculum reflect one of the major issues of project 2000, that is, "....every school in America will implement a program that would facilitate critical thinking and offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning for [all]."
One of the respondents explains, " the current curriculum tends to focus on the standardized programs without much regard to non-traditional students. It generally ignores such factors as "students'perspective, and their prior experiences."

Implied in these comments are the suggestions that the present curriculum needs to be modified. It needs to fit the learning needs of all students including the ones who do not fit the category of traditional students, they are the non-traditional students.

Assignments

Another area of concern was the nature of assignments. With regard to assignment one of the respondents provides an account of her experience:

> I enrolled in an undergraduate nursing program Before the first week ended, I began to believe it was a terrible mistake for me to enroll in a program which is geared to the needs of traditional students. Every time I tried to do an assignment I felt it was just plain busy work and I was not learning anything new. But because of the fear that I might annoy my teachers I did those assignments.

The above comments reflect the view that generally the assignments are geared to the needs of traditional students they do not address the no-traditional students' level of knowledge and understanding (Shankar, 1990).

Social Isolation

With regard to social isolation, the non-traditional students stated that they often feel isolated and miss out on numerous social activities. Most of them are commuters, they often live and work away from campus, have to fulfill family and work related responsibilities. One participant stated:

> It takes a lot of time and effort to be able to participate in social activities on campus. So much has changed it becomes difficult for other students to accept and understand our point of views. Everything is so new; there is no interaction between us and the other students. To me, as a non-traditional

student, life is tough and very rough.

Classroom Structure

Sometimes the classroom structure with sophisticated equipment and hardware presents problems for the reentry level students. One of the respondents said:

> It is not that I do not understand the technology related programs but the problem is, when I was away it has changed. I feel as if I have to unlearn many items in order to learn the new techniques. It requires so much time and energy.

Theoretical Framework

The problems are compounded further when they try to interpret the classroom theories in light of their prior experience. The non-traditional students have their own perspectives. Such perspectives are hard for others to comprehend, this causes frustrations for many non-traditional students (Shankar, 1993), as their style of learning is self-directed. Tough (1982), noted that the majority of non-traditional students would like to have a self-directed plan of learning. Such plan would allow them to test concepts in light of their own experiences. This view is shared by one of the respondents who was out of school for 15 years:

> It is not that I do not understand the ideas but everything seems so new. And then it keeps changing I get so frustrated.

Interpersonal Interaction

Participants expressed their views on their interaction with faculty. They found that some faculty members showed understanding toward the unique situation of nontraditional students. However some felt that it is very difficult to interact with professors who have preconceived notions about educational philosophy and believe in a structured curriculum designed only for the traditional students. One of the students who returned to college after 11 years said:

> It is so difficult to interact with the professors. They do not know how to communicate with us. They go through chapters so fast that I cannot relate to the material in the class and get confused. One time I asked the professor to explain few things to me. This is what the professor said," you should see a psychiatrist." There is no empathy. I think that faculty needs a workshop or training session where they can learn about us.

Somewhat similar views were expressed by Another non-traditional student she commented:

> Interacting with faculty is very stressful. Many of my professors never had hands on experience. When I would make some comments about relating the material to real life situations they would become very defensive. Perhaps they feel that I am questioning their authority.

Implications

The excerpts from the narratives of non-traditional students clearly indicate that these students do encounter difficulties on college campuses. The purpose of this study was to investigate and examine the communication and learning problems of non-traditional students. Their responses to open ended questions clearly echo their concerns and difficulties pertaining to learning and communicating. These students want to be able to connect their classroom learning to their personal and professional experiences. They would like their professors to assist them in relating the theory and ideas to daily life.

The participants in this study specifically stated that they faced many problems in communicating and learning. During the interviews they made the following suggestions:

Curriculum

The traditional curriculum tends to focus on the standardized tests without much regard to the individual students'style of learning and prior experiences. The current curriculum should be modified. It should assist the non-traditional students in relating the classroom learning with their prior experiences. This would help the students in improving their self-esteem.

Mentoring Program

One of the factors that often contributes to the non-

traditional students' difficulties is not knowing the system well. Therefore a mentoring program designed particularly for non-traditional students can be very beneficial. The participants specifically pointed to the need of having mentor with whom they can discuss the issues of concern at a more informal level.

Support Group

Formation of a support group would provide the non-traditional students with the opportunities to interact with other students who have similar background. They indicated that either the teacher or the mentor can provide assistance in forming such a support group.

Net working

The participants also express a need for communication network. They stated that such network would provide them with an opportunity to discuss their academic and social difficulties with those students who have had similar experiences. In addition to this the interaction with other students can improve their skills in interpersonal communication.

Faculty Advisor

Some respondents experienced that many of their professors were not familiar with andragogical principles of learning. Therefore a faculty advisor who has familiarity with andragogical principles should be appointed.

A faculty advisor, who is familiar with the andragogical principles of learning, can assist the other faculty in

understanding the difference between learning styles of the non-traditional and traditional students.

Orientation Program

Another suggestion made by the participants pertains to an orientation program. Such program should furnish appropriate information to every reentry level student. Such program should be specifically designed for non-traditional students as their needs are different than the needs of traditional students.

More Communication With the Faculty

In addition to the above suggestions all the participants indicated that there is a need for more and better communication with the professors. After all, stated one respondent, " faculty members are instrumental in developing, exchanging, and replicating effective teaching material."

Conclusion

In view of current information based on non-traditional students' narratives it is clear that they face many problems. The participants have made some very useful suggestions. These suggestions can assist the educators and administrators in developing a framework for designing a pedagogy suitable to the communication and learning needs of non-traditional students.

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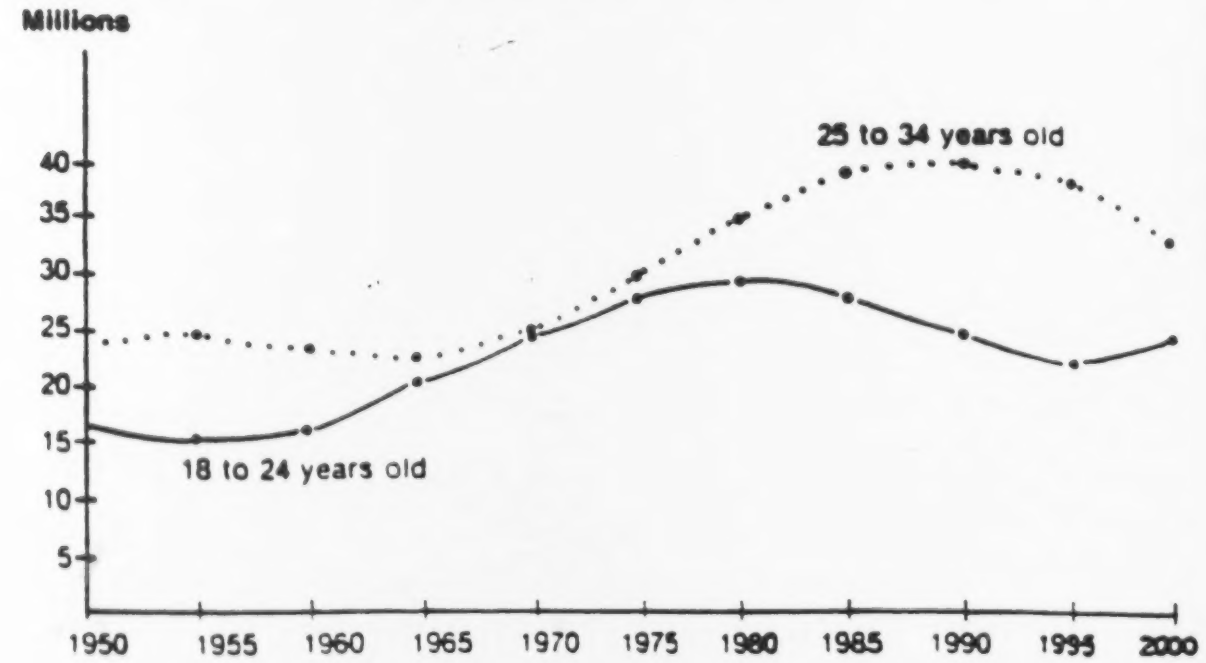
Appendix A

POPULATION CHANGES FOR SELECTED AGE GROUPS,
1950 TO 2000



Source: Mary A. Golladay, The Condition of Education 1976, vol. 3, (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, U. S. Government Printing Office, 1977), p. 182.

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